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# The Vibrant Traditions of Masaya: El Mestizaje as a Culture, a Process, and a State of Being

Isabelle Lee

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The Vibrant Traditions of Masaya:  
*El Mestizaje* as a Culture, a Process,  
and a State of Being



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## **Abstract**

“The only constant in life is change.” What this old adage leaves out is that the processes that catalyze these changes can occur in vastly different ways which impact the product. In the case of the history of Masaya, Nicaragua, today’s dominant culture of *mestizaje* is the result of the arrival of the Spaniards to the Americas and the process of racial and cultural blend that followed between Spanish, indigenous and African peoples.

But in this mixing process, Spaniards held disproportionate power: most of the changes they imposed were made through violent and deceptive imposition. Yet indigenous and African people still subversively preserved their traditions and left bold influences on the new *mestizo* culture. This essay records how these cultures amalgamated and are present in Masaya’s folklore and sense of identity, paying mind both to the influences of the cultures that mixed to form it as well as giving dignity to *mestizaje* is its own distinct culture.

It also extends the concept of *mestizaje* as a process of racial and cultural syncretism that is still occurring in Masaya today. This modern *mestizaje* is a more balanced, natural, and equal exchange of cultures occurring through globalization and technological advances. Masaya’s traditions of folklore, which were originally products of global fusion, are now being subject to more modern fusion. This investigation also examines how Masaya is receiving these changes and modern formation and perception of mixed identity.

Key Words: Mestizaje, syncretism, folklore, transculturation, identity, race, culture, ethnicity, Nicaragua, Masaya, mestizo, indigenous, traditions

## **Resumen**

"La única constante en la vida es el cambio." Lo que este adagio omite es que los procesos que catalizan estos cambios pueden ocurrir de maneras muy diferentes que influyen en el producto. En el caso de la historia de Masaya, Nicaragua, la cultura mestiza que es dominante es el resultado de la llegada de los españoles al continente americano y el proceso de mezcla racial y cultural que siguió entre los pueblos españoles, indígenas y africanos.

Pero en este proceso de mezcla, los españoles celebraron un poder desproporcionado: la mayor parte de los cambios impuestos se realizaron a través de imposición violenta y engañosa. Sin embargo, las personas indígenas y africanas aún subversivamente conservaban sus tradiciones y dejaban influencias atrevidas en la nueva cultura mestiza. Este ensayo documenta cómo estas culturas se amalgamaron y están presentes en el folclore y el sentido de la identidad de Masaya, el pago de la mente tanto a las influencias de las culturas que se mezclan para formarlo, así como dignificar al mestizaje como su propia cultura.

También se extiende el concepto de mestizaje como un proceso de sincretismo racial y cultural que aún se está produciendo en la actualidad en Masaya. Este moderno mestizaje es un intercambio más equilibrado y natural que está ocurriendo a través de la globalización y los avances tecnológicos. Las tradiciones folclóricas de Masaya, que eran originalmente productos de la fusión mundial, están siendo objeto de fusión moderna. Esta investigación también examina cómo Masaya está recibiendo estos cambios y la formación y la percepción de la identidad mixta.

Palabras clave: Mestizaje, sincretismo, el folclor, la transculturización, la identidad, la raza, la cultura, Nicaragua, Masaya, mestizo, indígena

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## Introduction

Culture is a concept that can be almost impossible to define. A given culture's qualities are broad, yet specific, intimate, and nuanced. But, for starters, tangible aspects are the easiest to note: drawings, paintings, documents, sculptures, and literature. Yet in the case of *Mestizo* expression, one of this investigation's main themes, finding historical and cultural objects such as these is a challenge. As one of my interviewees stated, when the Europeans came to indigenous communities to conquest and colonize, they destroyed almost every physical item they could.<sup>1</sup> With such a tangible wealth of these cultures lost, it would seem that the Spanish would be able to subjugate the aboriginal people better emotionally, making them feel lesser and that they had no other cultural alternative to adopt.

Yet there are parts of indigenous culture that escaped eradication. These intangible elements endured in people's minds, bodies, and souls through oral myths and legends, music, dances, food, practices of artisanship, and more. As Spanish, aboriginal, and African peoples increasingly mixed, the customs did as well, but they did not die. These acts form a living culture intricately tied to the bodies that practice it rather than static pieces of paper. They rely on reenactment and interactivity, deepening community bonds and encouraging the culture's longevity. However, anything lasting over time is subject to change. As each generation enacts their inherited traditions, they add their own life's context of the times to the culture, furthering the fused nature of *mestizaje*.

It is with this in mind that I am writing my investigation, which was based on the following research question: "How can identity formation of *Mestizo* people of Masaya, both individually and collectively, be seen in art, food, holidays, dance, and music?" In Masaya, homeland to an indigenous group known by the names Chorotega, Mangue, and Monimbó,

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<sup>1</sup> Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: Mestizaje in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

new mixed-race generations as well as their monoracial relatives all became active contributors to the constant process of *Mestizaje* that transformed the region's dominant culture.<sup>2</sup> The living, syncretized traditions that arose from the collision of indigenous, Spanish, and African peoples echo this history of imposition and subversion that produced the *Mestizos*. Thus, each cultural expression that I examine holds important implications about *Mestizo* identities.

In this investigation, I will explore the concept and history of *mestizaje* as a process of cultural change which activates a specific state of being in individual identities and modifies or forms a culture. Change is natural and inevitable, but the ways in which it occurs can greatly vary. One type is convergence, which could occur as violently as a car crash, as is the case with Spanish imposition, or as peacefully as the mixing of coffee with cream, like when an Chinese man and his Vietnamese friend make a meal together. These exchanges, if enough people employ them often enough, build a new culture influenced by the other cultures contributing to it as well as the nature of their confluence. Identities that engage with this nascent social web will feel their roles shift in the new context, perhaps leaping in to join eagerly, perhaps condemning it, or perhaps adopting certain traits and rejecting others, existing on undefined territory. My project records the history and constant process of *mestizaje* and resulting *mestizo* culture of Masaya's specific folklore and how these influences combine to form Masaya's *mestizo* identity.

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<sup>2</sup> Silva Valle, Maria Jose Ocarina. Elaboración De Guía De Los Recursos Socio-culturales Del Departamento De Masaya Y La Meseta De Los Pueblos. Universidad Americana UAM. Facultad De Administración Turística Y Hotelera. June 2003. Accessed April 16, 2016.



## Terms, Concepts, and Themes

To begin, I would like to clarify between two terms I will employ many times in this investigation. For the purposes of this paper, I chose to assign two definitions to the word *mestizaje* whose shared characteristics are significant, yet I distinguish them with uppercase and lowercase initial letters.

- *Mestizaje*: as a proper noun, this term refers to a very historically specific process of racial and cultural mixing amongst indigenous, African, and Spanish peoples that began in Nicaragua with the arrival of the Spaniards in 1524. Has connotations of unequal power dynamics. This definition corresponds to *Mestizo* as well.
- *mestizaje* (n): a general phenomenon of change through the mixture of races and cultures in any way and over any time period. The degrees of change may be small and occur on a minor scale or much more dramatic; they exist on a spectrum. This broadened definition can describe historical *Mestizaje*, but not vice versa. This definition corresponds to *mestizo* as well.

In his book *Disidentifications*, José Muñoz offers the concept named in his title as a survival technique for people of marginalized identities that serves as an alternative for identifying or counteridentifying.<sup>3</sup>

- Identify/assimilate (v): to willingly adopt that which the dominant ideology declares one to be.
- Counteridentify (v): to deny that which the dominant ideology declares one to be. Yet in this reactionary act, one is still defined by the dominant ideology. By declaring that “I am not ‘x,’” one is still defining oneself around the “x.”

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<sup>3</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

- Disidentify (v): to “situate oneself both within and against the various discourses through which one is called to identify”<sup>4</sup>

Masaya’s Museum of Folklore starts their exhibit with a definition of the term.

- Folklore (n): “the cultural richness of the people, expressed in anonymous form. It is the life, customs, myths, legends, religious beliefs, rituals, foods, music, dance, singing, poetry, sayings, theater, crafts, popular art ... It is the living expression of our culture!”<sup>5</sup>

### Background Context

When the Spanish disembarked onto the land of Nicaragua in 1524, they came with horses, disease, and the Bible.<sup>6</sup> But another import they brought with them, one that would forever alter the racial demographics of all of Latin America, were genes. Spanish *conquistadores* and colonists quickly launched themselves to a position of power and subjected indigenous and enslaved African people to exhausting physical labor, emotional trauma, and sexual violence. As a result of the former, as vast numbers of aboriginal peoples perished from disease and abuse in a veritable genocide, they left behind a new race. Under a complex racial categorization system composed by the Spanish, these descendants were called *Mestizos*, what one of my interviewees called “the fruits of colonization.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Disidentification." Disidentification. Accessed May 01, 2016.  
<http://enculturation.net/files/QueerRhetoric/queerarchive/disid.html>.

<sup>5</sup> El Museo De Folclor. La Cultura Folclórica De Masaya.. Masaya, Nicaragua.. 8 April 2016.

<sup>6</sup> "Nicaragua." New World Encyclopedia. Accessed May 01, 2016.  
[http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Nicaragua#Spanish\\_colonization](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Nicaragua#Spanish_colonization).

<sup>7</sup> Vasquez Rojas, Miguel. Festival organizer. Interview re: Festivals of Masaya/mestizaje in religion. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

The English translation of *mestizaje* is the pejorative word “miscegenation,” a term invented to forbid and condemn, defining and outlawing the act of interracial marriage. Although these historical connotations are specific to the United States, the concept had similar negative semantic overtones in Latin America’s chapters of conquest and colonization. According to Smith College’s *Vistas* project, “in the 17th century, for instance, a Spanish dictionary defined *mestizo* as a mix of different species of animals. By implication, it was a trespass of the order of nature: if Spaniards defined ‘pure’ or ‘noble’ blood as good, then they considered its dilution, or loss of purity via mixing, undesirable.”<sup>8</sup>

But by the twentieth century, *Mestizos* of Latin America reclaimed their names, embracing their identities as something to be proud of.<sup>9</sup> They inverted notions that their heritage was simply the product of superior Spanish blood with inferior aboriginal and African lineage. Instead, they defined their culture as its own unique entity, created out of multiple origins yet more than just their sum. This act of empowerment gave *Mestizo* identity and culture a sense of dignity.

### **Researcher’s Lens**

I am a twenty-one-year-old biracial ciswoman who was raised in an upper-middle class family in the United States. For the majority of my life, one of the most salient features of my identity has been my race. My dad is Taiwanese American while my mom grew up in the Southern U.S. and has Irish heritage. Growing up biracial could be very isolating and painful at times because I had very few people like me to learn from. Since I lack a

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<sup>8</sup> Leibsohn, Dana, and Barbara Mundy. "Surveying Mestizaje." *Surveying Mestizaje*. 2005. Accessed April 16, 2016. [http://www.smith.edu/vistas/vistas\\_web/units/surv\\_mestizaje.htm](http://www.smith.edu/vistas/vistas_web/units/surv_mestizaje.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Leibsohn, Dana, and Barbara Mundy. "Surveying Mestizaje." *Surveying Mestizaje*. 2005. Accessed April 16, 2016. [http://www.smith.edu/vistas/vistas\\_web/units/surv\\_mestizaje.htm](http://www.smith.edu/vistas/vistas_web/units/surv_mestizaje.htm).

phenotypical and linguistic link to Taiwan, since my identity and makeup of my family are often questioned, since I did not receive the affirmation of seeing people like me represented in my life or in the media, and since I grew up in a country with a highly racialized history and rigid ethnic social order based on assumptions of purity and segregation, I sometimes felt invisible, lonely, incomplete, and unconfident during my formative years.

Upon entering college, I have found solace in studying race and gender, which made me realize that the only person who can define my identity is me. Getting involved in social justice communities and organizations on campus led to the formation of my closest friendships through which I learned that being whole is not always about homogeneity; multiple parts- each different and each essential- can combine to form a whole. I have a place in which I feel I belong and a conviction in who I am.

All of these experiences and perspectives are part of the lens with which I navigate the world. My personal grappling with identity have made me want to learn more about how other multiracial and multicultural people express who they are. Although no one's lineage is fully insular, many societies have operated under the paradigm of simple, neat racial absolutism and ignore more complex narratives. I chose to investigate the confluence of different races and their formation of a new culture for my Independent Study Project because of my own academic and personal interests as well as to add to documentation and preservation of valuable, yet undertold, histories.

Although my personal ethnocultural heritage and context of identity formation are quite different from those of most of who I interviewed, I found myself relating to many of their sentiments. Multiracial people- even if they are individuals with no shared heritage- can often connect on many experiences they have in common as mixed people in ways that they cannot connect to monoracial individuals with whom they share heritage. For example, several interviewees expressed that although they are *Mestizos*, they gained the most

confidence in their identities by revitalizing their indigenous roots. Thus, they relate more to one side, although they do not negate the other parts of their ancestry. Similarly, I strongly identify as a Taiwanese American, yet also acknowledge that my mother's heritage is part of my own as well. Although I never mentioned my ethnic background with those I interviewed, my personal experiences gave me a more nuanced understanding of concepts of mixed race and culture since they are themes I have had to consider for my whole life.

But while I could connect over numerous similarities between me and those with whom I spoke, there were many more differences. I am not *Mestiza*, and I am not Nicaraguan. Masaya's racial history and demographics render it an environment that highly contrasts from my own context, and I cannot pretend to understand parts of *Mestizaje* on a personal level.

According to a 2013 census, 69% of Nicaraguan residents identified as *Mestizo* as defined as "Amerindian and white."<sup>10</sup> The vast majority these people would have to trace back many generations to find their first "monoracial" ancestors. And many of these unions, usually between Spanish *conquistadores* and indigenous women, were unconsensual: one tragically common example of European imposition. The Spanish with the strongest links to Spain topped the social order and *Mestizos* were seen as lesser due to their mixed blood, and yet dramatic population shifts wrested careful control of racial power dynamics from the hands of the Spanish. Even after aboriginal groups were obliterated- even after enslaved Africans mostly remained on the Caribbean Coast- even after numbers of the Spanish population stabilized and stagnated, numbers of *Mestizos* kept multiplying. Enough of a *Mestizo* presence existed for them to have children with each other as well as with people of the aforementioned groups, furthering the process of *mestizaje* and producing a *Mestizo*

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<sup>10</sup> "The World Factbook: Nicaragua." Central Intelligence Agency. October 26, 2016. Accessed May 02, 2016. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/nu.html>.

majority. These multitudes had power in numbers; they embodied disruption of racial “purity,” and yet their huge populace mandated that they be acknowledged. In present-day Masaya, *Mestizo* race and culture dominate.

Compared to most *Mestizo* people in Masaya, the lineage of my mixing is very direct: I am first-generation, fifty percent Asian and fifty percent white. The process that led to me being born was my parents falling in love rather than an exhaustive operation of imposed sexual subjugation. This power dynamic led to the birth of a whole new race that now dominates the region, where complex lineages are common and concepts of racial categories deviate far from the modern U.S. model. In North America, I am a child of a fairly rare union in my society and feel isolated as one of a handful of mixed children I know, invisibilized in the country’s popular narratives, and pressured to choose one identity to adhere to conventional absolutist categories. In the U.S., while most members of society are “monoracial,” my four-person family contains three distinct racial identities. Meanwhile in Masaya, a majority of society is of mixed ancestry while most families are composed of more homogeneous demographics.

It was very important for me to critically and consciously distinguish the many factors of my experiences with multicultural identities with those that I heard in Masaya. These connections and contrasts enhanced the development of my project as they fostered deeper analysis, nuance, and comprehension.

## **Methodology**

Over my four weeks in Masaya, I conducted ten interviews and three participant observations. My advisor, Maria Jose Ocarina Silva Valle, connected me to most of the interviewees using knowledge of her hometown as well as experience from conducting her own cultural research on the city. Two of my interviews were with people I met my own

through interacting with them in daily life in Masaya. I conducted these two interviews towards the end of my investigation when I realized that relying solely on people who my advisor knew could create biases in my results, heavily favoring more formally educated people with cultural specializations. I also recognize that the responses I acquired are from older interviewees, ranging from ages thirty-three to eighty-two, with the majority in their sixties. This age bias is unfortunate since younger perspectives would have been very valuable in my research on cultural changes today, most of which are arising from younger generations. I was limited by time, however, since this theme in my topic became evident only after I had returned to Managua. I wholeheartedly acknowledge that this is an unheard perspective. My interviews were with an equal number of men and women, five of each gender, although my conversations with the men tended to go more in-depth because some of the women with whom I spoke had time commitments and had to leave earlier.

Throughout my in-depth interviews, I tailored my list of questions according to the speaker's cultural specialty, which ranged from patron saint festival organizing to marimba making. I also had several questions that I asked to each interviewee regarding personal identity, the culture of *Mestizaje*, and their thoughts on Masaya. Examples include: "How do you identify racially and culturally?" "What does *el mestizaje* mean to you?" "Why do you think Masaya is recognized as 'the birthplace of Nicaraguan folklore?'" I also took precautions so that my research was conducted ethically, giving my interviewee all the information they needed to consent. Before we began our conversation, I would introduce myself as a student and the nature of my project, ask for permission for their answers to be recorded, and inform them that I would be changing their names in my paper so that their responses remained anonymous.

I gleaned the rest of research information from three participant observations, pertinent literature, and grounded theory. My participant observations took place in a

leatherworking workshop, a hat maker's workshop and a folklore performance, and in these settings, I was able to observe mostly younger people whose input I lack in interviews, although the observations in no way substitute for an interview. Through the books I read over the ISP period I gained theoretical and historical knowledge which allowed me to conduct my research and analysis in a more informed fashion. To gain knowledge on *mestizo* identity, I read parts of *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa and *Disidentifications* by José Muñoz. My advisor gave me three resources on Masaya's history and culture: *Memorial de Masaya* by Julio Valle-Castillo, her own college thesis, and speeches on the myths, legends, and festival traditions by Dr. Silvio Jose Ortega Centeno. The books *The Grimace of Macho Ratón* by Les Field and *To Die in This Way* by Jeffrey Gould proved quite useful since their research combined the themes of *mestizaje*, art, artisanship, traditions, and identity in a Nicaraguan context as I seek to do with this investigation. I used the notes I gathered from the literature, my interviews and observations, and from a few events earlier in the semester to perform grounded theory. This method allowed me to review my collected information for key concepts, organize and code recurring themes, and thoroughly analyze my findings.

### **Literature Review**

Two literary works proved especially imperative in my understanding of *mestizaje*: *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa and *Disidentifications* by José Muñoz. Anzaldúa's intensely personal mixed media, multimedia account explores *Mestiza* identity and mental formation from her context as a Mexican American woman living near the border dividing the two countries. She describes how this unnatural physical border can affect one's psyche, partitioning her ancestral land and identity, declaring them as separate although she embodies their union. Although Masaya is not a peripheral Nicaraguan town, this imposition



of arbitrary division that is contradicted by the natural flux of human migration and mixing rings true to racial categorizations that classified social hierarchy in its colonial history.

Anzaldúa posits that *mestizo* people possess a unique consciousness and way of navigating the world in which they negotiate staying intact despite exterior pressures to conform by shifting fluidly in their multiple identities. The book's intimate and artistic format allowed me to more deeply understand the manifold nature of identity as well as the *mestizo* survival tradition of subverting social rules and categorizations in order to exist as they are.<sup>11</sup>

*Disidentifications* also theorizes on the themes of living one's unfixed, shifting identity despite static formidable societal conventions through his experiences with race and queerness. One of José Muñoz's strategies occurs on a micro-level through an individual's everyday actions, which is particularly relevant to my examination of actions as culture. He writes,

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. This process [...] scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.<sup>12</sup>

The act of disrupting dominant practices both articulates that one's existence is valid and highlights the flaws of the conventional paradigm's limitations. And when they do adopt certain aspects of existing systems, "minoritarian identities" take these symbols and breathe new life into them, sometimes even transforming them so that they are actually subverting the

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<sup>11</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

system of power from which they originally came. These disidentifications give access to “worldmaking” in which a new space for oneself and one’s culture is constructed. In this space, “minoritarian identities” no longer must straddle disparate ideologies and instead having something new, something of their own, something that accounts for and affirms all and not just part of their identities.

Muñoz’s notions clarified and masterfully articulated many ideas I had been exploring on my own prior to reading his book. His innovative explanations of these terms and sequences helped me conceptualize trends I saw in my research and develop my thesis. I see the progression of disidentifying as beginning with an individual who does not fit within a dominant paradigm, either due to living comfortably in a different system that transformed into a new one or due to being born into a society that does not accommodate one’s identity. In a spirit of subversion, these individuals typically start their disruption with seemingly mundane acts that may grow dramatic or catch on among other “minoritarian” people. This group’s disidentifications can eventually form a culture of its own through collective “worldmaking.” In Masaya, I see many instances of *Mestizo* disidentifications in its common folkloric traditions which started as everyday acts of destabilizing through rejection and retention of new influences. There is a name for a distinctively *Mestizo* spirit of rebellion which reminds authority that there are people who can exist outside of a prevailing system, seizing power from them by exposing its flaws and acting as an identity that cannot be contained. These practices combined and compounded into a unique *Mestizo* culture, a product of “worldmaking” through disidentification. I am excited to employ Muñoz’s thought in the context of Masaya’s process of *mestizaje*, individual perceptions of identity, and folkloric traditions as an expression of *Mestizo* culture.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

## Research Findings

### *On Identity*

Many families in Nicaragua start Sundays a traditional *nacatamal* with bread and coffee for breakfast. In one of her class lectures, Dora Maria Tellez employed the *nacatamal* as a symbol of Nicaragua's *Mestizaje* and the cultures that have influenced the country's racial identities. One of the dish's fundamental ingredients is the plantain leaves in which it is encased as it cooks over a wood fire. Plantains, originally from Africa, were introduced to Latin America from European slave ships. Pigs, and thus pork, also first came to Nicaragua by way of Columbian exchange and integrated into the *nacatamal*. Most of the dish is *masa*, a hearty corn-based filling made of *maiz*, a staple crop native to this land.

These three ingredients unify to create a distinctly Nicaraguan food, representing the origins of *Mestizo* culture. But the *nacatamal* is more than the sum of leaves, pork, and corn; it is an original food that cannot be described as only ingredients, but a whole meal. Tellez defined this phenomenon as "syncretism," a complete mix in which components cannot be disassociated.<sup>14</sup>

Nowadays, the majority of people in Nicaragua identify as *Mestizo*, which is understood as its own race and culture grounded in the legacy of conquest. When asked to name their identities, all of my participants referred to themselves as *Mestizo* or *Mestiza*. But a few of them gave caveats: two participants noted that they also had Lebanese heritage as well, and two others stated that although they acknowledge that they have mixed ancestry, they identify more as indigenous.<sup>15</sup> These two men, Jorge and Antonio, cited that living in or

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<sup>14</sup> Tellez, Dora Maria. "La Colonización Con Su Sincretismo Cultural Y El Mestizaje- Identidades Sin Definición." Lecture, Rewriting Nicaragua: Literacy, Rights, and Social Change, Nicaragua, Managua, February 24, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Lopez Salazar, Leticia. Dance teacher/vendor at Artisan Market. Interview re: Dances of Masaya/traditional clothing. 12 April 2016. Artisan Market. Masaya.

near the Chorotega neighborhood of Monimbó fostered this deep personal connection.<sup>16</sup>

When I first arrived in Masaya, everyone directed me to this part of town upon hearing my investigation topic. At first I was confused: my project was on *mestizo* cultures rather than indigenous. But through my interviews, I learned that this part of Masaya has a vital role in the formation of the town's *mestizo* identities. Having a strong, living link to their ancestor's town and traditions reminds them of where they came from. Through my research, I learned that Monimbó's indigenous traditions and Masaya's *Mestizo* culture greatly overlap. The Chorotega customs that still live on today were not immune to the process of *Mestizaje*—the fact that they have endured for so many centuries means that they were subject to great change and had to be adaptable to survive. The errors in my previous assumptions were assuming that “fully” aboriginal people still practiced a more ancient, “pure” form of indigenous traditions while more mixed *Mestizos* have a newer culture that was produced through the process of conquest and colonization. The truth is that perceived racial phenotypes and actual cultural traditions do not always align.

As Jimena Sandoval told me, “there are almost no perfectly pure indigenous people left. We are all mixed, even if only a little. No one in the world is ‘pure.’”<sup>17</sup> With this statement, she makes a few important postulations. First, that the concept of racial “purity” is an illusion: humans procreated for many years before the races used to categorize modern populations even existed. Second, that there is a sort of scale of mixedness, and even those perceived as “monoracial” are somewhere on that continuum. This dispels the concept of

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Sandoval, Jimena. Musician. Interview re: Indigenous-Mestizo relations. 3 May 2016. Home of a friend. Managua.

<sup>16</sup> Villa Perez, Jorge. Marimba maker/musician. Interview re: Mestizaje in music/artisanship. 8 April 2016. Home. Monimbó.

Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Gueguense/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

<sup>17</sup> Sandoval, Jimena. Musician. Interview re: Indigenous-Mestizo relations. 3 May 2016. Home of a friend. Managua.

racial amalgamation results in homogeneity. There are nuances in these fusions that distinguish them from other combinations, and the oppressive notion of “purity” favors certain races over others and posits that mixing devalues the superior blood. So while there are certainly people in Monimbó who are more indigenous than others elsewhere, no one is solely indigenous, as is the case with any race. The aboriginal practices carried on in this old Chorotega town are, in fact, examples of a type of *Mestizaje* I seek to study, with strong remnants of the cultural collision of Spanish imposition and African and indigenous subjugation. No long-lived culture can exist in isolation, “purity,” and permanence as it interacts horizontally with other groups and is vertically carried down through the eras by different generations. It seems that nowadays in larger Nicaragua, more indigenous-identifying people habituate customs from the early days of Latin American *Mestizaje* than do *Mestizo*-identifying people, who generally participate in the modern *mestizaje* process of globalization.

### *El Güegüense*

Penned in Masaya by an unknown author, *El Güegüense* (also known as *El Macho Ratón*) is a satirical multidisciplinary work that combines theater, dance, and music to defiantly ridicule Spanish imposition. The script, which Santiago called a “tangible treasure of the spirit of rebellion” in our interview, was written in a mixture of the indigenous Nahautl language with Castilian Spanish, a *Mestizo* language.<sup>18</sup> Many people, including Leticia and Antonio, speculate that the author was *Mestizo* since most aboriginal people were never

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<sup>18</sup> Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: Mestizaje in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

taught the Roman alphabet and since it is dubious that a Spanish person would write a work so offensive towards their own identity.<sup>19</sup>

The *Güegüense*, the work's protagonist, is a clever, bold *mestizo* man who uses the negative tropes that indigenous blood comes with inferiority and stupidity to his own advantage. Over the play, he fools the Spanish governor into marrying his daughter off to the *Güegüense's* adopted son, subversively playing into stereotypes by pretending to misunderstand the oppressor and lead him to underestimate the *Mestizo*.<sup>20</sup> This archetypal character symbolizes what is called a "spirit of *Güegüense*," whose main traits are using humor and double meaning in language as indirect ways to criticize and ridicule under the pretext of the joke or misunderstanding. Antonio extrapolated on this undeniably *mestizo* state of being as "a natural resource to deal with oppression which Nicaraguans have been using against authority all throughout history."<sup>21</sup>

Since its birth in Masaya, the work traveled to Diriamba by way of commercial exchange that led to cultural exchange. The town latched onto it and developed their own techniques of performance in a process of *mestizaje*, invigorating the play with new audiences, performers, and styles.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile in Masaya, *El Güegüense* slowly faded without cultural maintenance and is rarely performed today. Leticia told me that there are still attempts at cultural restoration in which excerpts of the dances or scenes are performed and the texts are studied in Masaya curricula, but Diriamba is now known as the home of *El*

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<sup>19</sup> Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Gueguense/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

<sup>19</sup> Lopez Salazar, Leticia. Dance teacher/vendor at Artisan Market. Interview re: Dances of Masaya/traditional clothing. 12 April 2016. Artisan Market. Masaya.

<sup>20</sup> Vasquez Rojas, Miguel. Festival organizer. Interview re: Festivals of Masaya/mestizaje in religion. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

<sup>21</sup> Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Gueguense/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

<sup>22</sup> Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Gueguense/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

*Güegüense*. This fact saddened her as a folkloric dance teacher and Artisan Market vendor whose life's work is based on and dedicated to her culture: "We have to preserve parts of our culture like this. They are important to who we are, and we cannot lose them."<sup>23</sup>

### *Music*

The *marimba de arco* is the most well-recognized instrument of Nicaraguan folklore music. During my time in Masaya, I was able to speak with Jorge, a Monimbó musician and marimba maker, and even hear him play a few bright, resonant songs with his creation. The marimba is a percussion instrument of African origin that resembles a xylophone. When Africans were kidnapped and forcibly transported to Nicaraguan's Caribbean Coast, they brought with them cultural knowledge that would become integral to many elements of *Mestizo* culture. One such contribution was the marimba, which traveled to the Pacific Coast with the extension of slavery.<sup>24</sup> Various forms of the instrument exist with differing physical forms and musical styles that have developed in its spread. While other marimbas are played standing up and use dried "elongated calabash gourds" typically seen in Guatemala or "the round jicara gourd more typically found on African marimbas" to produce sound, Masaya's *marimba de arco* is named after a curved wooden addition that allows *marimeberos* to sit down as they play and utilize harmonic wooden boxes for resonance.<sup>25</sup>

This *mestizaje* trend of both retention and adaptation proves true in terms of musical technique as well. When Jorge deftly performed a number of songs for me, I instantly related the buzzy and bright tone, held trilled chords, and strong rhythms to aural memories of my

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<sup>23</sup> Lopez Salazar, Leticia. Dance teacher/vendor at Artisan Market. Interview re: Dances of Masaya/traditional clothing. 12 April 2016. Artisan Market. Masaya.

<sup>24</sup> Vasquez Rojas, Miguel. Festival organizer. Interview re: Festivals of Masaya/mestizaje in religion. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

<sup>25</sup> "Marimba Con Tecomates." Rhythm Discovery Center. Accessed May 3, 2016.  
<http://rhythmdiscoverycenter.org/onlinecollection/marimba-con-tecomates/>.

family's Putumayo World Music CDs from Africa and the Caribbean. When I asked Jimena about this, she adamantly agreed and added that the *Mestizo* musical style of *la cumbia*, which is strongly tied to and often performed on the marimba, is also fruit of the African diaspora.<sup>26</sup> But Masaya has developed a musical style of their own heard in folklore songs, a style of indescribable common traits that both link songs of the genre together and distinguish them from other types. Among these traits are six-eight waltz style time signatures, intricate chords and rhythms, shifts between major and minor keys within the same song, and distinct melodic patterns.<sup>27</sup>

For both Jorge and Jimena, playing the marimba is a way to connect to their identities. Jimena, who started playing when she was eight, told me that her relationship with the instrument is a connection to her roots.<sup>28</sup> According to Jorge, growing as a musician also made him grow more in-tune with his identity. As the son of a marimba player, Jorge picked up the skill at quite a young age just from watching his dad play and experimenting with the instrument on his own. He became a very skillful musician without any formal training; perhaps it was a natural knack or even inherited instinct that taught him his talent. The ease and confidence he adopts when playing is clear, and this sense of belonging stems from Jorge fortifying his ties to the instrument that has been a part of his family for years. To him, being a musician is looking for, discovering, and conserving "what is ours."<sup>29</sup> It is a progression that requires dedication and effort but provides him with fulfillment. Nowadays, not many

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<sup>26</sup> Sandoval, Jimena. Musician. Interview re: Indigenous-Mestizo relations. 3 May 2016. Home of a friend. Managua.

<sup>27</sup> Villa Perez, Jorge. Marimba maker/musician. Interview re: Mestizaje in music/artisanship. 8 April 2016. Home. Monimbó.

<sup>28</sup> Sandoval, Jimena. Musician. Interview re: Indigenous-Mestizo relations. 3 May 2016. Home of a friend. Managua.

<sup>29</sup> Villa Perez, Jorge. Marimba maker/musician. Interview re: Mestizaje in music/artisanship. 8 April 2016. Home. Monimbó.



Masayans are learning how to play marimba, choosing to pursue other hobbies instead. With the Internet becoming increasingly available, there are many more ways for people to spend their free time, using modern technology to connect with the rest of the world rather than learning old traditions to connect with their own town. Jorge noted that even those who still play marimba often integrate current global styles, mostly heard in other Latin American music, into folklore songs. They take popular music fit it into the frame of folkloric time signatures and melodic garnishes, practicing modern *mestizaje* to produce a fusion.<sup>30</sup>

### *Artisanship*

Not only does Jorge play the marimba, he makes them by hand as well. The process takes around a month, which he begins by finding and collecting specific types of wood with which to build the instrument. Next he expertly carves and shapes the separate elements, from the curved, extended arch to individual resonance blocks. And finally, he fine-tunes and finishes the wooden product with discerning attention to detail. Jorge feels like he “leaves his mark” on each of his creations and prefers to play these *marimbas* that his hands already know so well.<sup>31</sup>

As a specialized craftsman, he can support himself when his instruments have musical needs and in terms of finances, he is able to at least partially earn a livelihood from his literacy in his own culture. This sense of independence stems from the empowerment one feels through the act of making, a skill passed down for generations in his family. Over the month-long process, Jorge feels more personally connected to indigenous and African

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<sup>30</sup> Villa Perez, Jorge. Marimba maker/musician. Interview re: Mestizaje in music/artisanship. 8 April 2016. Home. Monimbó.

<sup>31</sup> Villa Perez, Jorge. Marimba maker/musician. Interview re: Mestizaje in music/artisanship. 8 April 2016. Home. Monimbó.

ancestors who enacted the same traditional steps in decades past as he embodies the physical knowledge that they passed down.

Many houses in the indigenous neighborhood of Monimbó host artisan *talleres*, or workshops in which groups of people specialize in the handiwork of a particular item or material. I was able to conduct two participant observations in a leatherworking and hat making workshop, respectively, and noticed many interesting trends. It seems that most of these workshops are family-based, in which many people working are related to each other and live in the house hosting the *taller*. Due to this, the atmosphere was more relaxed and communal than other workplaces, and everyone seemed highly productive despite what might be seen as off-task or distracting in other environments. I think that the repetitive, physical nature of these assembly-line tasks allowed for the craft workers to stay chatty as well; the process is efficient, and muscle memory lets the brain drift to other things while still executing the same duty. Thus, as artisan folklore practices and community relationships are reinforced simultaneously, strengthening the culture doubly. As I explained earlier, most traditional remnants of indigenous groups that still remain are intangible since most of their items were razed. Yet these *talleres* generate new physical pieces in the modern era since the embodied knowledge of these acts of creation could be transmitted from person to person and mind to mind without the Spanish able to access them.

And while this empowering fact certainly aided in the preservation of these practices, practicality did as well: most artisan products are useful (shoes, bags, and chairs are popular *taller* items), and they can be easily produced at high volumes by following repeated instructions. Masaya's Artisan Market attracts many tourists who come to visit "the birthplace of Nicaraguan folklore." This profit opportunity drives a lot of *talleres*. It is quite possible that more traditional artisan items have been adapted to be more appealing to tourists' tastes, which means adhering other country's aesthetic preferences. While this

example of a modern *mestizaje* process can be concerning, these adjustments keep artisan products lucrative, which allows more *talleres* to keep practicing artisanship. In this sense, cultural alteration can be a means of cultural preservation.<sup>32</sup>

### *Dance and Costumes*

In the majority of my interviews, participants named dance as the custom through which folklore and the process of *mestizaje* are most expressed. Leticia, who runs a local dance center, says that all folklore dances are *Mestizo*. When I asked about specific African and Spanish influences, she responded that “They are in each dance and each movement.” This wise answer reminded me that *Mestizo* culture cannot be dissected and broken into percentages; it also has a subtle and distinct essence which cannot be easily articulated, taught, or assigned to outside groups. She did continue to say, however, that in the dances that accompany the *marimba*, the footwork has a strong resemblance to that of Spanish *flamenco* yet integrates the indigenous style of keeping one’s feet pretty much stuck to the floor.<sup>33</sup>

Leticia, who comes from a family of seamstresses, also provided me with knowledge on the folkloric costumes in which the dances are performed. *Marimba* dancers wear outfits in the fashion of *fantasia*, which is an exterior style from Mexico now integrated into the cultural recitals of Masaya. Personally, Leticia feels that this example of globalized, modern *mestizaje* represents the attitude that what can be found outside of Nicaragua is better than what they have here. She does not appreciate this viewpoint of her country as inferior, but

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<sup>32</sup> Participant Observation. Leatherworking workshop. Monimbó, Nicaragua. 12 April 2016.  
Participant Observation. Hat making workshop. Monimbó, Nicaragua. 12 April 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Lopez Salazar, Leticia. Dance teacher/vendor at Artisan Market. Interview re: Dances of Masaya/traditional clothing. 12 April 2016. Artisan Market. Masaya.

otherwise does not have a problem with the blend. Some traditional indigenous costumes illustrate the four cardinal directions through the placement of lush hibiscus flowers on the sleeves and neck area. Folkloric skirts are adorned with horizontal stripes of specific, boldly colored which represent the Earth's layers. Atop one's head may rest a European-style feathered hat, which is undoubtedly a manifestation of the *mestizo* processes in clothing worn on one's own body to represent identity.

Other traditional dances include the *Baile de las inditas* and *Baile de las negras*, whose place in the legacy of *Mestizaje* seems obvious. In *Baile de las inditas*, an indigenous male dancer dons a pale mask and European clothes to represent a Spaniard while an indigenous woman wears traditional clothes. This partner dance is said to be romantic and loving, but as Antonio expressed, "the Spanish was the oppressor and so he could never really be in love with the Indian woman."<sup>34</sup> This romanticized dance records a collective memory on the origins of *Mestizo* culture as a lovely courtship that is historically inaccurate. Who can be sure why this portrayal started? Regardless of the reason, this folklore practice and its implications are still an important expression of *Mestizo* culture.

Similarly, the *Baile de las negras* has a disputed history. As *marimba* music plays, two men dance as partners with their faces painted black. One of the two is dressed as and taught to dance in the style of a woman in a tradition of crossdressing seen in other aspects of *Mestizo* culture. When I asked one interviewee why dancers' faces are black, he answered that it was an indigenous tradition used to avoid being recognized before they started using masks. In modern manifestations, performers may use paint or a mask of any color to cover

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<sup>34</sup> Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Gueguense/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

their faces.<sup>35</sup> However, I heard from another source that the style started from imitations of Africans from the Caribbean Coast when they danced to marimba.<sup>36</sup> If Miguel was right, why did the dancers believe they needed disguises? If Antonio was right, were they ridiculing or celebrating this cultural difference? Once again, the roots of this tradition are murky and debated, but its role today is shaped by its audience's interpretations. Regardless of these opinions' veracity, they still hold the same impact as long as they are believed to be true.

The role of masks in Masaya's folklore traditions is robust, and the significance behind them is fascinating. To my inquiries about their purpose, Sergio referred to them as a "refuge," "a sign of protest which would protect identity when one is criticizing or ridiculing authority," and "often used in dances and patron saint festivals."<sup>37</sup> Masks serve well as physical symbols of the spirit of *Güegüense*, affording their wearers a double identity to go along with their expressions of double entendre, which uses visual obstruction to both protect their risqué actions with anonymity and allow them to better imitate and deride authority figures.

In indigenous zoomorphic religion, in which many gods possessed animal traits and could manifest in the human world as these animals, believers sometimes celebrated their faith in ceremonial masks. But when the Spanish arrived and seized power, they prohibited these traditions as "pagan" and "demonic." According to Antonio, they also declared that only human masks were permitted and must represent the Spanish, forcing a pale-skinned identity on instead. Women were not supposed to dance in indigenous culture, and the erasure of religious animal masks, dark-skinned faces, and women's artistic contributions from

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<sup>35</sup> Vasquez Rojas, Miguel. Festival organizer. Interview re: Festivals of Masaya/mestizaje in religion. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

<sup>36</sup> Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Güegüense/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

<sup>37</sup> Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: Mestizaje in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

indigenous customs added yet another grievance to the long list of aboriginal repression. Yet these limitations also led to the birth of several interesting *Mestizo* traditions, and the minoritarian groups often twisted or defied the Spanish regulations. Indigenous people continued to proudly don their religious animal masks, and in many cases when dancers wore a white Spanish masks, they did so to mock their oppressors, as seen in *El Güegüense* and *Los Diablitos*.<sup>38</sup>

According to Guillermo, who teaches at the Folklore School in Monimbó, dances in Masaya are also being subjected to a modern *mestizaje* process. Over his thirty-four years as a dancer, he has witnessed a lot of stylistic changes. But he says that in the past few years, he has observed in his classes the most dramatic and highest number of modifications to the folklore he teaches. Folkloric, ballet, and popular dance techniques are blending together and developing altered dances, a fact which he calls “very controversial.”<sup>39</sup> And yet he personally accepts that, “there are things you can try to maintain and things you can't. I teach one form and see students innovate it.”

I think part of Guillermo's acceptance of *mestizaje* in part comes from the fact that folklore dances are gaining popularity among younger people in Masaya today. It is a town priority, taught in every school as part of the curriculum, which increases exposure and accessibility to the tradition. And extracurricularly, there are so many dance groups that a good number of them cannot find an instructor. To fill this void and Guillermo has decided to step up and offer free night lessons. While he says that this decision has made him poorer and busier, it is clear that his passion for dance and teaching are more important to him. The more

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<sup>38</sup> Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Gueguense/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

<sup>39</sup> Lacayo, Guillermo. Dance teacher. Interview re: Mestizaje in dance/cultural preservation. 19 April 2016. Folklore School of Masaya. Monimbó.

access there is to learning, the more students dance and contribute more variety. Masaya's combination of high demand and interest with accessible supply through free lessons have led to a mini-renaissance in its folkloric dance traditions. A renaissance comes with reinvigoration, but also reinvention.<sup>40</sup>

### *Food*

The term "comfort food" refers to the cuisine a certain group eats that, for one reason or another, brings the consumer a sense of comfort, familiarity, well-being, and contentment. In short, it is the taste of home. Sensory qualities like a crisp, flavorful crunch of cilantro or the smooth, earthy taste of a refreshing drink of cacao can powerfully evoke certain memories in our minds and bodies. Food is personal, cultural, communal, regional, and essential. As Julia told me in our interview, "we define ourselves with food. In all our foods, there are characteristics that bring us together and are different from food from other places."<sup>41</sup>

The routine of making and partaking in a meal can nurture and enrich relationships and communities. In Masaya, a special occasion called a *mayordomo* brings together family and friends for a few days of cooking and sharing. For Julia, many of her favorite memories come from these intergenerational gatherings in which her loved ones gathered in a crowded house full of smells and laughter. As she grew older, she became one of the masterful cooks behind the meal, combining ingredients grown in her beloved Masaya to make food that tasted like home. The act of eating is in some ways quite meaningful and holy: to take

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<sup>40</sup> Lacayo, Guillermo. Dance teacher. Interview re: Mestizaje in dance/cultural preservation. 19 April 2016. Folklore School of Masaya. Monimbó.

<sup>41</sup> Santos Mendoza, Julia. Cook/seamstress. Interview re: Mestizaje in food/traditional clothing. 28 April 2016. Home. Masaya

something to be part of one's body to sustain one's health. The meals cooked in these *mayordomos* was worthy of fulfilling these purposes, cooked with love.

Nicaraguan cuisine is made up of African, Spanish, and indigenous ingredients which combine in *mestizo* dishes. Without plantains from Africa or rice and bread brought to the Americas by the Spanish, the country's gastronomy would be completely different.<sup>42</sup> In addition to the earlier *nacatamal* example, the dish *vigorón* also coalesces elements from all three of the original three *Mestizo* cultures. Enveloped once again in an African banana leaf, when unwrapped, this entrée is made up of a fresh lettuce salad sprinkled over crispy *chicharrones*, a pork snack brought over by Spain, all piled on top of aboriginal yucca. Indigenous diets relied heavily on yucca and corn known as *maíz*, which still remain integral components of many dishes. I actually believe that gender and ethnicity had a large impact on the *Mestizaje* of food. Julia, although she could name a few exceptions, told me that she did not think there were strong Spanish influences in Masaya's cuisine. Thinking demographically, the vast majority of Europeans who came to Mesoamerica to conquer and colonize were men, and traditionally, men depend on women for food. The feminized connotation of cooking, the lack of Spanish women, and the population of aboriginal women over whom the European men wielded significant power meant that the Spanish relied almost completely indigenous women to cook. Therefore, I think that most of the preservation of their traditional meals and the *Mestizo* innovation were works of indigenous women.

Julia told me that there is a distinct difference between traditional and modern cuisines in Nicaragua. Old-style foods tend to have strong indigenous influences and are associated with a more survival-based diet. These plates usually require a lot of preparation and cooking time, and the main priority over taste or appearance is to make a filling dish out

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<sup>42</sup> Flores, Dora Priscilla and Carolina de Silva. Food vendor and landlady. Interview re: Traditional food of Masaya. 27 April 2016. San Jeronimo Park. Masaya.



of affordable ingredients. In a more modernized society in which cheap, quick, and easy-to-make food is accessible, Julia is concerned that Nicaragua is slowly losing its traditional cuisine. Due to the world's growing international connectedness, a variety of food from other countries are now more widely available in Masaya, including pizza, Mexican, and Chinese food. Since the city is home to many middle-class families, basic sustenance is now not a concern, and people choose these newer options instead of the heavier and greasier food native to their own country. Yet Julia knows that even if it loses popularity, Nicaraguan traditional cuisine will never go away. Although people are embracing access to a wider variety of food options, that does not mean that they do not enjoy their country's aboriginal dishes any less. The craving for "comfort food" is deep and intense, a sort of hunger not fueled by the needs of physical survival, but rather the needs of cultural survival. Another reason these traditions will not significantly fade is because they are built into the calendar as festival foods that recur each year.<sup>43</sup>

### *Religion and Patron Saint Festivals*

The most obvious exhibition of *Mestizaje* may be seen in Nicaragua's syncretized religion, and the most obvious exhibition of this *Mestizo* Catholicism may be seen in Masaya's vibrant patron saint festivals. One of the biggest aims in the Spanish invasion into aboriginal territory was to "convert" indigenous peoples from their own faith, which Europeans saw as "savage" and "demonic," to Catholicism. Nicaragua's aboriginal people obviously resisted this violent imposition, but the Spanish subjected them to such merciless conditions that it seemed that many people had no other choice than to give in. And yet they never really did give in: even though they went to church, indigenous peoples subversively

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<sup>43</sup> Santos Mendoza, Julia. Cook/seamstress. Interview re: Mestizaje in food/traditional clothing. 28 April 2016. Home. Masaya.

paired their gods with a Catholic Saint equivalent who possessed similar traits in an act of disidentification. While the Spanish thought they had successfully converted the indigenous population to European Catholicism, they were actually generating a new *Mestizo* faith with a framework of Biblical ideology but also heavily infused with the “nature-based, pagan ideals” of aboriginal religions.<sup>44</sup> The fact that Saints play such a key role in Catholicism made this syncretism as smooth as it could possibly be, considering that it was a coercive and brutal union. While other strains of Christianity focus on Jesus and God only, the sect’s Saints, like the indigenous peoples’ polytheistic gods, allow for religious multiplicity, offering worshipers many individual, unique, and tangible figures with whom to intimately connect. At one point or another, the Spanish realized that indigenous peoples were matching their gods with a parallel Saint and added their own connection. In another attempt to subjugate their resilient spirits, the Europeans portrayed San Miguel, a powerful vanquisher, with a slayed dragon-lizard at his feet. This image was quite jolting to religious indigenous peoples since the reptile purposefully resembled their main god Quetzalcoatl; the Spanish were depicting their faith as superior and more powerful than theirs. It is an illustration of the amalgamated roots of *Mestizo* Catholicism, showing a violent power dynamic of oppression, yet also subtly revealing indigenous power: because they felt so threatened by indigenous subversion, the Spanish officially added Quetzalcoatl to their religious iconography and acknowledged the influence of aboriginal beliefs.<sup>45</sup>

Nowadays, Masaya is the home to the most patron saint festivals in Nicaragua, which are quite representative events of *Mestizaje* that will not fade away easily due to their annual

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<sup>44</sup> Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: Mestizaje in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

<sup>45</sup> Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: Mestizaje in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

repetitions. Leticia is proud that her town is the site of a full calendar year of celebrations, especially those of San Jeronimo that extend from mid-September to late November. I was able to speak with Miguel, a festival organizer, about the customs enacted over this three-month span. In official Catholicism, San Jeronimo was a reclusive man who translated the Bible and is the most popular saint of Masaya. But in *Mestizo* religious beliefs, Jeronimo's twin is the indigenous god of fire, volcanoes, and dance who is known as *Xochillpilli*. As the Masaya Volcano looks out over the city, standing tall over centuries and gently releasing smoke as performers sing and dance through the streets, there is no question which personality of this *Mestizo* figure is tied more deeply to the town and its people. All patron saint festivals include processions in which tangible religious icons are paraded through the town's streets and often to homemade altars in peoples' houses, an intimate religious act which localizes and personalizes the honored figure to its town. Everything is adorned with blooming flowers and small trees, a distinctly indigenous practice of using natural elements to honor and worship.<sup>46</sup>

One of the most distinctive celebrations of the San Jeronimo festival is a narrative dance called the *Torovenado*. In what Silvio Ortega calls "an act of humor with resistance that starts when one starts a relationship between the oppressed (the deer) and the oppressors (the bull). It is one of the most representative dances of our *mestizaje*."<sup>47</sup> Masaya's original name was "*Mazalryan*" in Nahuatl, which translates to "land of the deer" in English. While the agile, peaceful, clever, and feminine deer represents the aboriginal Chorotega people, the Spanish are symbolized by a bull that stands for force, rage, imposition, war, and masculinity. The dynamic between the threatening, aggressive bull and passive, serene deer offers a clear

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<sup>46</sup> Vasquez Rojas, Miguel. Festival organizer. Interview re: Festivals of Masaya/mestizaje in religion. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

<sup>47</sup> Ortega, Silvio. El Torovenado. 2014. Speech written for the Conference of Masaya Folklore.

and gendered depiction of relationships between the Spanish and indigenous people in this period that produced a new race. And thus the *torovenado* is the product of their union, a new blended animal to represent *Mestizaje*.<sup>48</sup> This dance, performed in traditional indigenous style, quite vividly acknowledges and centers the history and identity of a mixed ancestry in a performative act of worldmaking, creating a space for an individual who cannot fully accept nor reject existing racial paradigms.

### Discussion/Analysis

In *The Grimace of Macho Ratón*, Les Field describes “collective identity” as “an interactive, shared definition conceived of as a process of formation through the repeated activation of relationships.”<sup>49</sup> In my findings, the enactment of cultural traditions is a major factor in the construction of Masaya’s collective *Mestizo* identity. As one of my interviewees adamantly declared, “*Mestizos* need to learn their histories, both the good and the bad, to know who they are.”<sup>50</sup> Through enacting the folkloric customs of their ancestors to learn where they came from and in turn, adding their own styles to contribute who they are to this living history, *mestizos* in Masaya are both inheriting and modifying their identities and culture in an ongoing process of *mestizaje*.

In one of my interviews, I asked Jimena how *Mestizo* people handle cultural dissonance that exists due to the nature of the violent clash of ideologies that formed *Mestizaje*. Her answer was simple: most people do not question it because it is how they were

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<sup>48</sup> Ortega, Silvio. El Torovenado. 2014. Speech written for the Conference of Masaya Folklore.

<sup>49</sup> Field, Les W. *The Grimace of Macho Ratón: Artisans, Identity, and Nation in Late-Twentieth Century Western Nicaragua*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.

<sup>50</sup> Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: *Mestizaje* in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

raised.<sup>51</sup> The tensions between Spanish, indigenous, and African ideologies are not noticeable to someone who is used to living in a paradigm of these realities. She also jokingly pointed out that even though I go around everywhere asking which colonial influences affected which modern cultural markers, most Masayans do not walk around wondering, “does this food has Spanish or African influences, an if so, what are its implications?” This served as an important reminder that historical *Mestizaje* is no longer an emerging, unstable culture, but rather a well-established, dominant system from which one can disidentify.

In the *Baile de las negras* and several other dances, a pair of men partner together on the dancefloor. While this act in some ways, it enforces gender and sexuality norms between a heterosexual man and women, it simultaneously undermines them in an act of disidentification. The custom of crossdressing includes specific dance techniques imitating women’s movements in which the crossdressing man is trained as well as elaborate female dress. Antonio states that this is a very old indigenous practice which has nothing to do with romance or sexuality.<sup>52</sup> But for those able to participate in this act of gender fluidity, some might find a sense of liberation in the ability to occupy multiple identities in this manner. *Mestizos*, accustomed to negotiating the complexity of the manifold nature of racial/cultural identity, may find even more freedom through these folkloric norms of disidentifying. Yet it is imperative to recognize that *mestizos* were granted this access to gender fluidity due to the exclusion of *mestizas* from dance.

Nowadays, Masayan men and women are able to freely participate in their customs, including *El Torovenado*. This festival event has strong roots in crossdressing, and Santiago

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<sup>51</sup> Sandoval, Jimena. Musician. Interview re: Indigenous-Mestizo relations. 3 May 2016. Home of a friend. Managua.

<sup>52</sup> Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Gueguense/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

told me that a decent number of women participate dressed as men, although men dressing as women is still much more common. In more recent years, gay, trans, and other individuals of diverse gender and sexual identities enthusiastically contribute to the tradition of crossdressing, dressed in elegant attire and vibrant makeup. Although on a normal day, most of these people might attract varying degrees of negative attention when adopting a feminine appearance, Santiago tells me that in his observations, their crossdressing is tolerated at worst and more often received positively on these days.<sup>53</sup> Yet for one day during the festival of San Jeronimo, these people are able to dress how they want confidently due to the nature of the designated disidentifications traditionally enacted during *El Torovenado*. These community customs of gender subversion combine during this time to temporarily construct a world that accommodates for expression of sexual fluidity. Although this community-wide disidentification is empowering, it is not an everyday act, and Masaya's dominant paradigm usually does not accommodate for people who neither identify nor counteridentify in terms of gender. Maybe the town will experience a folklore-based *mestizaje* movement for creating a more inclusive ideology towards gender in the future. People of a diversity of sexual and gender identities are also adding to the *mestizaje* of Masaya's customs, bringing their own skills and talents as well as embracing the multiplicity, fluidity, and ambiguity that an amalgamated culture allows for.

For a certain period of time before the term *Mestizo* represented a complete race, the Spanish hierarchy operated through laws that had specific rules for the Spaniards and the Indians, but did not account for *Mestizos*. Dora Maria Tellez posits that this special in-between existence encourages the spirit of *Güegüense*. This state of being allows one to act

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<sup>53</sup> <sup>53</sup> Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: Mestizaje in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

with the privileges or consequences of both or neither and constantly disidentify, generating new spaces of interaction, ideas, and identity. Yet in forging the new, the act of disidentifying can also sustain the old by adapting and reinvigorating parts of culture that might not otherwise survive the inevitable changes of time.

In our interviews, one participant told me that Masaya's recognition as "the birthplace of Nicaraguan folklore" is a misnomer.<sup>54</sup> He argued that while his city has been the best at preserving folkloric traditions, they were not all created here. Instead, he sees Masaya as its guardian. The customs it has carried down for generations are the strongest still-living expressions of the culture of Nicaraguan *Mestizaje* born from conquest and colonization. And yet in its conservation, this city is also a site of transformation of traditions in the context of a more and more connected world.

On the other hand, I think perhaps calling Masaya the "home" over "guardian" may be better after all. "Guardian" implies that Masaya has protected folklore in a secure fortress away from other influences, as if anything could threaten it. It seems like it prioritizes static, permanent preservation. Meanwhile, I think that "home" demonstrates the caring and personal, not militaristic, relationship that Masaya has had with its culture. It implies a setting of growth over time yet also of consistency and familiarity. A home nurtures to sustain rather than isolating to preserve. While one may travel over the world, one always comes back home, celebrating memories and remembering one's origins.

Yet I also understand wanting to conserve one's traditions as they are. It is an urge that comes from love for one's culture, which is a deeply personal relationship. From what I saw in Masaya, generational growing pains play a large role in the tug-of-war between

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<sup>54</sup> Lacayo, Guillermo. Dance teacher. Interview re: Mestizaje in dance/cultural preservation. 19 April 2016. Folklore School of Masaya. Masaya.

preservation and transformation. The era of change has been a particularly rapid one, with the catalyst of modern technology drastically changing the way in which we interact with each other. Older people may see these new life conditions and feel that the ways in which they are accustomed to interacting are threatened. But it is possible for things to change and yet in some ways, stay the same. I saw many adults acknowledge that there are degrees of transformation, and the essence of most customs usually stays the same over time. And many agreed that change is natural and approach modern *mestizaje* both by looking backwards, remembering what traditions they most cherish but also that they came from mixed cultural heritage. And after this reflection, they turn to look forwards to the future, ready to witness a little bit of freshness and innovation mix with the rich amalgamation of *mestizo* traditions.

## Conclusion

In present-day Masaya, a town demographically marked by centuries-old history, both of the two processes of *mestizaje* and *Mestizaje* are occurring simultaneously. While the *Mestizo* identity was born of a fusion of other cultures, many are concerned that their town is losing its traditions, ironically enough, through modern forms of *mestizaje*. But the patterns of *Mestizaje* carried on for long enough that a new *Mestizo* culture formed, which grew so prolific and long-lived that it became the region's dominant racial and cultural presence. It is no longer new and is firmly established as its own distinct identity. In this position, as a culture whose current prescribers number in the millions, whose existence spans centuries, and whose goal is preservation, *Mestizo* culture has been, is currently, and will always be subject to change. No long-lived culture can exist in isolation, "purity," and permanence as it interacts horizontally with other groups and is vertically carried down through the eras by different generations. Yet due to its intangible media, Masaya's folklore culture is



particularly resilient no matter the context, transforming in relatively small degrees and retaining the essence of the practice.

To employ Muñoz's concepts, it is through "recycling" these "encoded meanings" that *Mestizo* ancestors were able to make a world of their own from their own everyday actions, one which would also be accessible to later generations by enacting these practices. By dematerializing aspects of their culture by granting descendants with inherited corporeal knowledge, instructive and repetitive processes, and a rich mental map to which the Spanish had no access, indigenous and African people built a synthesized folklore. The process of forming this heritage, created in a *mestizo* manner of rejecting components and assuming some to mix with others, is a means of creating cultures in which minoritarian individuals such as *mestizos* can exist in an accommodating environment that accounts for their needs and existence outside of typical societal categories.

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